



Mary Charleson's story of Nancy



Nancy Daley was born in Magnetawan, Ontario on July 30, 1924. Although the population of Magnetawan briefly ballooned above 300 with the birth of her five siblings, it has remained solidly a “village”, relegated to a humble, yet proud small town status in rural Ontario about an hour south of North Bay. Her father, Tom Daley met his future wife one summer while delivering vegetables by canoe on Ahmic Lake. Nancy’s mother Lydia had ventured to Canada’s lake country from Pittsburg to take a summer job as help. At 16, she fell in love with both Tom and Canada. Together they built a family, a sawmill and hydroelectric business, and nurtured family connections that have remained strong to this day. While Nancy’s father Tom was a small town rural boy to the core, her mother Lydia, emigrated from Czechoslovakia to the United States with her family, following her father, a University professor. The threaded connection to Europe and close ties to family in the US was a strong influence on Nancy growing up. Cousins from Pennsylvania arrived each summer to spend time with the Daley’s in Magnetawan. The family home burst with activity, and at its nucleus was Nancy’s Mom Lydia, cooking, baking and singing. Nancy was one of three sisters and three brothers. Together the girls shared a bedroom, as did the boys. She spent her summers canoeing and camping, and her winters playing hockey on the lake, skiing and tobogganing. Much of her formative years were during the 1930s, a time of economic hardship. It was an existence humble by today’s standards indeed, but to hear her describe it, it seemed she wanted for little. They were a close family, and continue to nurture those ties through regular phone calls across the miles between siblings.

Nancy attended elementary school in Magnetawan, and high school in Burks Falls. She was a natural born teacher, and indeed this love became her life calling. She worked as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Chapman Valley, and several other small rural schools, prior to actually receiving formal Teachers College training. For a brief period she ventured off to the big city of Toronto, receiving office training, and worked for IBM. But she returned to northern Ontario toward the end of the war, and reveled in the social aspects, as did many young women her age, of having air force men from afar visit town on their leaves from war. It was a surreal time filled with music, dance halls, and young adults teetering between the possibilities of death and having the time of their life.

Although a suitor emerged, Nancy seemed determined to set her own agenda, and wanted to pursue a career and a life of independence prior to committing to a family. This trait, which distinguished her from her female peers at the time, emerged as a defining influence in her life. Nancy has always been an independent, self-sufficient woman. She worked her entire life because she wanted to. And she loved it. She became a successful teacher in her 20’s, teaching grades 1-7. She obtained training in special education and speech therapy and was a teacher at numerous schools within her district. She became school principal in her 30’s.

Nancy met my father John Holborn in her late 20’s while teaching in Keswick, Ontario. They married in 1952, but it wasn’t until she was 39, that she had her first, and only child, a daughter they named Mary. John was handsome and 19 years her senior. It was an age difference that only came to define and somewhat divide them in their later years. The 19-year spread also meant that when her daughter started kindergarten, her husband was ready to retire. They did what was necessary at the time, and what for Mary always seemed normal. It was only in hindsight that Nancy appeared the maverick and John the exceedingly practical partner. He stayed at home, did the cooking, cleaning and housework. She went off to work, earning the family’s income. Few women in the 1960’s worked, and even fewer were the sole income earners for their upper-middle class families. Nancy was a generation ahead of herself.

Growing up with such a powerful and empowered female influence had a profound influence on how I have chosen to live my own life. I witnessed first hand what it is like to pursue your passion and life calling. I learned at an early age that women buy property and investments and can do well financially. I watched Nancy reward herself with sports cars, boats, vacation properties and holidays with family and close female friends. Although there were certainly times when her superhero cape flew off, she did a fine job balancing her role as career girl and Mom.

Nancy lived in the Keswick and Sutton, Ontario area for 50 years, prior to moving to West Vancouver in 1999. Because she worked outside the home, she joined the “working girls” groups at the curling rink and the church. These women were of a generation that did work outside the home, so she found herself networked in a group of women 10-15 years younger than herself. Forming close friendships with younger women helped her maintain a youthful outlook throughout life. I remember her taking numerous ski holidays to Austria, France, Quebec and Western Canada with groups of women friends. I joined the ski ladies in Lake Louise one year, after I had moved to Vancouver. They sure loved to ski hard, eat well and laugh a lot. I could see why she enjoyed it so much.

In addition to taking to the slopes, Nancy was a speed demon behind the wheel of her red boat at the cottage on Ahmic Lake. She summered there with family and recharged her batteries for the coming year. She was happiest behind the wheel, wearing her captain’s hat, towing waterskiing kids. Of course an instructional demo was usually called for and she happily obliged.

At 48 Nancy underwent surgery to fuse two discs in her neck and remove a bone spur. It was a final attempt to stop what had been relentless pain. She had stared down the risk of paralysis, and emerged victorious. Nancy watched her own mother die far too young of breast cancer at 52, and she herself cheated cancer at 51 following a diagnosis of seriously progressed bowel cancer and successful surgery. Remarkably, she remains cancer free 36 years later. Addressing mortality in mid life helped her define how she would choose to live from that point on. She chose to travel, reengage past passions and discover new experiences.

Nancy retired from teaching when I was in 2nd Year University. The stress of the job had begun to take a toll on her health, and it was only in her last 6 months of teaching did I first witness a woman who had fallen out of love with what she was doing. She worked hard and long, and retired at 60. But as she was quick to note, she became very busy in retirement, volunteering in her community. The change re-invigorated her. It was a time in her life to give back, and she did.

At 70 Nancy learned to fly ultra-light airplanes and pursue her pilot’s license. Soaring with the birds above Lake Simcoe, she saw both her community and her life from a different perspective. She bought her first pair of rollerblades that same year and skated the streets of Sutton regularly for exercise. She brazenly decided to visit former teaching staff one day, and skated through the hall of one of her old schools. The initial reprimand by the principal was repealed once they realized who it was. Although she was always one to teach by example, she quickly pointed out that she was now retired.

Nancy once famously brought a bottle of wine to a bible study group. The invitation had read BYOB, which she realized upon arrival meant bring your own bible. She of course had that too. I suspect it was one of the better meetings the group had that year.

Following graduation from University in 1987, I drove west to visit friends I had made while travelling abroad, and never returned. I’ve made Vancouver and the north shore my home ever since. The bond with my mother remained strong with return trips to Ontario, but it was hard on her being separated from

her only child. My father died in 1993, and although she missed the younger man she had married, she became liberated from the care he had required as he aged. In 1999, following the birth of her first grandchild, Nancy decided to move west. It was a bullish move, to pick up at 75 and move away from her extended family, friends and community of 50 years to come to Vancouver. But in a reflection of her lifelong attitude towards change and looking to the future, she declared, “I’d rather move when I’m young and able so I could make friends, than when I’m too old to bother.” So, like a young girl in her 20’s, she sold off her furniture, shipped out her treasures, and packed her car. The skis went on the roof.

Having Nancy live close by has been a blessing. She has been able to watch her grandchildren grow, and they have been able to form a bond with her. She was a godsend on many occasions, being an eager and willing helper with my young toddlers. And she did a lot of it on the flip side of her 80th birthday. At 87, age has started to take its toll, but Nancy remains as active as possible. She now lives in West Vancouver, and participates in activities at the Seniors Centre and the church. She continues to form friendships wherever she sets down.

Some of my fondest memories of Nancy are on the ice, with skates and a hockey stick in hand. At my Mother’s urging, one winter my Dad made a back yard rink. It became the focal point for the neighbourhood kids. It also enabled Nancy, to coach us all on her infamous ‘backhand’ shot. She was an oddity on the rink with the boys, but quickly gained their respect with her quick shot and skating abilities. She once took me to Maple Leaf Gardens to see the Leafs play our hero, Bobby Orr and the Bruins. It was a road trip that most would share as father and son. I guess the passion for hockey took a chromosome detour in my family.

In fact at the age of 86, Nancy helped start a floor ball league at the Seniors Centre in West Vancouver. She made quite the appearance when she first showed up sporting her Olympic team Canada jersey, with stick in hand, and a huge smile. With the recent growth of floor ball, a close cousin to floor hockey, the group uses curved fiberglass sticks and a woofle type ball. Nancy points out, “The ball goes pretty fast, a lot faster than a puck. But I suppose the good thing about that is, you really don’t have to run after it that hard. You just wait a few seconds for it to be shot back in your direction!” Although the tactics may have changed, her enthusiasm and connection to the game has not. It’s a heartwarming scene to watch.

Nancy would be the first to suggest her life is far from extraordinary. But isn’t it the collection of the mundane punctuated by pivotal events that define us all? Perhaps the single theme that characterizes my mother Nancy was the unwavering pursuit of her life passion, and the fierce independence and focus that led to her success. Her love of life, forward thinking attitude and nurturing of family and friendships has made her strong. She was a role model a generation ahead of herself.